Deconstructing Dinner
Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY
308A Hall St.
Nelson, British Columbia
V1L 1Y8

www.deconstructingdinner.ca
250-352-6597

December 2, 2009

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6
Canada

Response and comments following the December 1, 2009 meeting of AGRI:

Dear Members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food,

Since January 2006, Deconstructing Dinner has acted as a weekly source of food and agricultural information for Canadian farmers and eaters. Our weekly radio show is heard on 37 radio stations across Canada and is available on the web through various mediums.

In our efforts to examine topics not often covered by most Canadian media, our content has also been in demand at public events. Over the past year, I've publicly addressed events hosted by the Dairy Farmers of Canada, the Province of Nova Scotia and the Canadian Farm Writers Federation among others.

One of the subjects that Deconstructing Dinner has taken a very keen interest in is genetically modified food. This interest has not so much arisen because of the controversial nature of the subject, but is much more the result of the overarching food systems and food security concerns that a careful examination of GMOs can help shed light on.

I had the pleasure of listening on-line to your committee meeting on December 1 which spent considerable attention on the subject. I commend you on your efforts to engage in what I believe is much-needed dialogue on the subject.

Having listened in on the entire meeting, I'm compelled to share my thoughts and responses to some of what was shared throughout that meeting as I believe my unique perspective as a journalist who has spent considerable time on this subject might be of interest to the Committee.

I must stress, that while I don't profess to be an expert on GMOs, my role as a journalist has allowed me to observe the sheer misinformation that has permeated dialogue on this subject among all parties; industry, government and the public alike.

One of the more recent examples of this misinformation was observed as part of the recent dialogue between China and Canada over the blackleg fungus that has disrupted canola exports. According to an article published on October 28 by *Reuters*, Minister Ritz has been communicating to the Chinese that there is no chance of blackleg from Canadian canola spreading in Chinese fields because the canola Canada ships to China is genetically modified and contains a gene that keeps it from sprouting. This comment was also reported on the front page of the *Manitoba Co-operator ("Minister Says Canadian Canola Doesn't Sprout" 11/05/09)*.

The Minister appears to be grossly misinformed on the nature of GMOs. The only technology that has been developed to prevent a seed from sprouting is Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (GURTs) - otherwise known as Terminator

seeds. To date there have not been any approvals of GURTs anywhere in the world, and the Minister is clearly misinformed as to the function of GMOs as they exist today. But this was not the first time a Member of Parliament has been unaware that Terminator genes are not yet approved in Canada. On May 5, 2008, Bill C-517 was debated in the House of Commons. The bill was calling for mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods. Using his background as a farmer of GMOs, MP Rob Merrifield rose to address his concerns with the proposed bill. In his opening remarks, he spoke to some of the environmental concerns with GMOs and in particular cross-contamination concerns:

> "I am a little concerned about that with genetically modified foods, but I am also very confident that Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency are watching that very closely. To date I have not seen a significant problem on that side of it. One of the reasons is that the technology has allowed for a terminator gene to be put in so that the new generation of those seeds is not allowed to reproduce and cause that kind of problem." – *MP Rob Merrifield, HOC, May 5, 2009*

The sharing of this mis-information as part of a debate that concerned the health of Canadians and our environment understandably became the basis for a one-hour episode of Deconstructing Dinner.

There are a handful of comments shared as part of your December 1, 2009 meeting that I would like to address here.

MP Randy Hoback - "I grow GMO canola, and I look at my crop fields probably 10 years ago and if we got 25 bushels an acre we were excited. This last year we pushed 45."

It must be stressed, that there are no seeds on the market that have been genetically engineered to produce higher yields. On the other hand, traditional breeding practices have improved, and any genetic traits within a crop that lead to higher yields can only be the result of traditional breeding, NOT genetic engineering. While some growers might experience higher yields because of greater ease to control weeds, yield differentials are not the result of the genetic engineering itself. The only varieties of canola on the market that have been genetically engineered are for herbicide tolerance. I believe this is one of the greatest GMO misperceptions. As public breeding programs disappear and industry has become more involved in those and other academic breeding programs, industry has successfully consolidated control of the seed trade and by extension, genetic resources. This concentration of ownership has allowed industry to take the best genes for canola, or soybeans, or corn, and package them up in a product to sell to the farmer. By inserting a herbicide-tolerant GM trait into the seed, industry has successfully isolated the best traits achieved through traditional breeding and protected this research and control over genetic resources by assuming greater control over the seed. This approach severely limits (if not outright restricts) farmers to having little choice but to purchase a GM variety in order to get the best traits. Needless to say, the GM trait gives the company more protection through the accompanying patent and the technology-use-agreements required to be signed by farmers. This assures the company that the farmer will be purchasing seed the following year and not saving seed as has traditionally been practiced in Canada.

MP Randy Hoback – "What also excites me in the canola industry is I see the end product that is coming out of the GMO side. For example the IMC canola that Cargill brings out and how it's actually adding healthy oil into the food system… reducing cholesterol and stuff like that."

There is no canola in Canada that has been genetically engineered to produce high-oleic oils. Cargill's IMC products are the result of traditional breeding (in particular hybrids) with some varieties now containing a herbicide-tolerant gene. Again, these benefits are not the result of genetic engineering.

"No evidence" of deleterious health impacts of GMOs on humans.

This is a common position taken by GMO proponents. If this position is to be echoed within the Agriculture and Agri-Food Committee, I urge the Committee to also be asking the question, "is there anyone looking?" I assure the Committee that there have been no ongoing human safety studies on the impact of GMOs since they were introduced into the food supply less than 15 years ago.

Unknown MP - "This week The Economist had a large article dealing with the challenges of feeding the people of the planet in the next 50 years… They went on to say that GMOs might be the answer."

The issue of addressing global hunger came up on a number of occasions throughout your December 1 meeting. There is indeed a longstanding association promoted by industry that GMOs can address the global issue of hunger. It's for this among a other reasons why Deconstructing Dinner pays such considerable attention to the subject of GMOs as the common association between hunger and GMOs is quite narrow and ignores some of the most fundamental reasons for hunger and malnourishment around the world. I urge the Committee to avoid engaging in dialogue over the role of GMOs in addressing global hunger and malnourishment without first becoming aware of whether or not there is already an adequate supply of food to feed the planet. It's through asking such questions that we can collectively arrive at understanding the inefficiencies of food distribution; the inefficiencies of specialized growing of commodities in countries who have sacrificed growing food for themselves to instead grow commodities for a global marketplace; *un*fair trade; culturally and nutritionally inappropriate foods; food wastage found throughout the entire field to table food chain; the agricultural practices used and their impact on healthy soils; localized and global social and economic inequalities that have dramatically increased in recent years; and poverty. I further urge the Committee to keep in mind that hunger in its most extreme form (famine) is rarely caused by lack of food.

"Reduced chemical use resulting from GMOs"

This too came up on a number of occasions throughout the meeting and this too is a common argument put forward by GMO proponents. The *Canola Council of Canada* as an example refers to a study on GMOs and canola on their web site that states, "Growers of GM canola in the study used less herbicide. They applied 6,000 tonnes less chemical in both 1999 and 2000." When this and similar figures are used, I urge the Committee to not take this at face value and also ask, "how has the strength of those chemicals changed since GMOs were introduced?"

In conclusion

The responses/comments included above are only the tip of the iceberg for the reasons why the Canadian public is so concerned over the presence of GMOs in the Canadian food supply. Furthermore, these comments are only the beginning for all of us to collectively recognize how little we know about GMOs.

In the end, and regardless of the ongoing debate that has waged for almost 15 years, the issues around GMOs mean very little to the most important matter – trust. Both industry and the Government of Canada have failed to assure the Canadian public that GMOs are safe.

While I commend the Committee for considering to further examine this issue as suggested in your December 1 meeting, I do believe its appropriate for members of the Committee to accept that the Government you represent has not adequately assured the public of the safety of GM food and just as hydrogenated oils are labeled differently from non-hydrogenated, informing the public that the food they are purchasing contains GMOs is a small but significant step to reconciling this failure and regaining the public's trust.

In good food,

Jon Steinman
Deconstructing Dinner